

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Civic Services or Events

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

A. Introduction

In the diverse communities served by the Church of England, it is not uncommon for local authorities or other public or community groups to seek to celebrate or commend their work through organising services or events involving people of different religions. Church of England clergy and parishes will generally wish to engage positively with such proposals, but they will also need to make clear the theological, liturgical and legal parameters within which they work. Particularly important are questions relating to venue, format, and participation. The guidelines presented here set out general principles relating to these issues, but cannot address detailed situations. It is imperative that ample time is allowed for the planning of such events, and that the direction of the bishop is sought in any case of uncertainty.

When approached by national or local authorities or other organisations wishing to organise a civic service or event, clergy should try to explain that a number of different models are possible. Many people of all religions may be uncomfortable with the idea of worshipping together; a social or educational event may be more appropriate as a way of bringing people together. Another pattern with much to commend it is that of a series of official visits to different places of worship where civic guests and those of other religions can be present at the usual worship of a religious community.

It is important that clergy and others invited to take part should be clear from the beginning as to who carries overall responsibility for the planning, funding and delivery of civic services or events involving people of different religions. Where this role belongs to a national organisation, local authority or community group, clergy should be prepared to offer advice and practical support, but they should also be clear about the extent of their responsibility for planning and for decision making.

If a civic event is envisaged involving representatives of a number of different religious communities on a basis of parity, it is usually appropriate for this to be held in a secular venue equally acceptable to all. Guidelines for such events are set out in the following section. Where a civic service is planned to take place in a Church of England church, it must be recognisably an act of Christian worship. The parish priest should take the lead role in planning the service together with key ecumenical colleagues. Guidelines for such services are set out in Section C. Any event taking place in a Church of England church, whether it is a service or not, is subject to ecclesiastical law. Guidelines for services and other events held in Church of England churches are set out in Section D. At any service or event in a Church of England church, the parish priest should ensure that he or she maintains control over the list of those officially invited to be present or to participate in a representative role. Guidelines for appropriate invitations are set out in Section E. People of other religions may also be present in a representative capacity at various other kinds of services in Church of England churches which cannot be described as civic services in the strict sense. Some suggestions as to these situations are to be found in Section F.

B. Multi-faith civic events in secular venues

Clergy or other official representatives of the Church of England should ensure that their participation in multi-faith events is such as to allow them to express the integrity of their Christian faith. They must not take part in anything that could be reasonably seen as implying assent to doctrines inconsistent with those of the Christian Church in general, or the Church of England in particular.

Church of England clergy or others involved in the planning of multi-faith events should make a serious effort to ensure that representation from the Christian community is appropriately ecumenical in its scope.

Christian contributions to multi-faith events should be such as to affirm what all present hold in common, without glossing over differences. It is not appropriate to offer material which would cause offence or unnecessary difficulties for people of other religions, but a clearly Christian perspective should be expressed. Particular care should be taken when selecting scriptural readings, to avoid causing upset to Jewish participants.

It should be made clear that there is a difference between, on the one hand, being present and attentive while prayer is offered from any religion, and on the other hand, participating in or assenting to that prayer. Where representatives of a number of different religions offer prayer, this should in each case be done in a way which is authentic to their own respective traditions. If prayer is made by Church of England clergy or others as representatives of the Christian community, this should normally be offered in the name of Jesus.

If it is suggested that common acts of prayer, or joint affirmations, be made by all present, great care should be taken to ensure that these are neither syncretistic nor platitudinous. It is imperative that those taking part in such events should see texts in advance, and they should be satisfied that they can take part in them with integrity. They should also reflect, and if necessary seek advice, on how such common acts

will be perceived within the wider church and community. Shared silence may be more effective than any verbal formulae in expressing a sense of being together as people of different religions. It may be good to explain to organisers that it is not necessary for a representative of every religious group known in the community to be invited to make a contribution.

Where there is a credible local inter faith or multi-faith group, representatives of its participating groups should be invited. Note that The Church of England has a policy regarding engagement with New Religious Movements and alternative spiritualities, which is available on the Presence & Engagement website. In particular this policy distinguishes between formal and informal engagement and advises against offering or accepting formal invitations. Because some groups are known to exploit occasions where Church of England clergy or other Christians accept invitations to events, it is advised that where it is known that members of New Religious Movements are instigating or are included as guests at a civic event, that Christians refer to the policy referenced above or contact the Church of England's national adviser.

C. Christian Worship Involving People of Other Religions

It is good practice to give a special place of recognition at Christian civic services to leaders or representatives of other religions within the community. Representatives of other religions should be treated as honoured guests, with seating reserved for them in a prominent place, and where appropriate they should be invited to enter in procession. It is helpful if a member of the church is given the specific responsibility of welcoming and accompanying them. Appropriate hospitality should be provided for them after the service, with food to meet different dietary requirements clearly labelled and kept separate.

The content of the service should be explained to members of other religions, and clear guidance given as to what is and what is not expected of them in terms of posture, vesture and participation. Care should be taken to ensure that members of other religions are not expected to behave in ways incompatible with or inappropriate to their own beliefs – for example, through being themselves asked to join in credal affirmations or to sing Christological or Trinitarian hymns. In case of a celebration of the Eucharist, it should courteously be explained to members of other religions that they will not be receiving Holy Communion.

Sensitivity should be exercised in choosing suitable liturgical material which does not cause gratuitous offence or unnecessary difficulties for guests from other religions, but this must not mean the removal of all distinctively Christian references. Crosses or other Christian symbols should not be removed or covered. It is entirely appropriate to invite representatives of other religions to join publicly in simple liturgical actions (such as lighting candles or exchanging greetings) within an overall Christian liturgical framework, providing that they are themselves comfortable with such a role. Such participation should be discussed in advance to ensure that all are aware of what will be asked of them and can raise any concerns.

It may be appropriate as part of a Christian service to invite personal reflections from members of the community who belong to other religions. If they do contribute in this way, it should be made clear that

they are speaking as citizens informed by their religious beliefs and values, rather than as representatives of another religion as such. It should always be remembered that Christian worship is the local expression of an international community of faith; those conducting civic services involving people of other religions should have a particular concern for the ways in which they may be reported to, and perceived by, Christians in other countries.

D. Services or Events held in Church of England Churches

Any services or events held in a Church of England church are subject to canon law. Services must satisfy the requirements that they 'in words and order are reverent and seemly and are neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England' [B5]. Other events held in churches should be 'such as befit the House of God, are consonant with sound doctrine, and make for the edifying of the people' [F16]. In case of doubt, direction should be sought from the bishop. Consecrated Church of England buildings are set apart for ever for the worship of Almighty God and such worship is governed by the laws and customs of the Church of England. Civic services including active participatory roles for representatives of other religions should be so planned as to ensure that the integrity of the whole service as an act of Christian worship is clearly preserved.

If representatives of other religions are invited to read during the service from their scriptures, it is of the utmost importance that the texts to be used should be agreed beforehand with the parish priest. Good quality English translations should always be made available. No reading or other contribution from any participant should include any element hostile or contrary to the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it.

It is not appropriate for a member of another religion at a civic service in a Church of England church to lead the congregation in prayer. If a representative of another religion is to address the congregation during a civic service in a Church of England, this should be appropriately framed – for example as offering reflections from their community's perspective, or in the format of an interview.

E. Invitations to Services or Events held in Church of England Churches

A serious effort should be made to ensure that representation from the Christian community is ecumenical in its scope, and that Christians of different traditions play an active part in a civic service. It is not necessary for a representative of every religious group known in the community to be invited to make a contribution to a civic service or event. Where there is a credible local inter faith or multi-faith group with Church of England participation, representatives of all participating groups should be invited to be present. However it is imperative that those organising civic services or events are aware of local dynamics between faith groups. Intra-communal tensions may not be obvious to outsiders, but can affect who is willing to attend or participate in an event. Diocesan interfaith advisers are often well-positioned to assist with this.

F Other Church of England services involving people of different religions

Guests from different religions may be invited in a representative capacity to various other services in the life of the Church of England – for example, the inauguration of a new ministry, the dedication of a new place of Christian worship, or the celebration of a significant event in the life of the Christian community. The general guidelines in Sections C, D and E will apply in these cases also.

People from different religions may also sometimes be invited to churches to help the Christian community be enriched in their understanding of different beliefs and values; it is likely that this will involve the visitors in sharing with the congregation items from the scriptures or liturgies of their religions. Careful preparatory work should precede such occasions, and their educational nature should be made clear.